

House Education Committee
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HB377: Revise laws related to K-12 accreditation standards

Testimony by David F. Bedey

Madam Chair and Members of the Committee, my name is David Bedey. I am here today to testify in support of House Bill 377.

My professional background includes 15 years of service on the faculty of the United States Military Academy at West Point, where I ended a 30-year military career as a professor of physics. At West Point I taught courses in physics, mathematics, and the philosophy of science; led pedagogic reform in the Department of Physics and Nuclear Engineering; and participated in the review and assessment of the Academy's "core curriculum," a set of 30 required courses spanning the humanities, social sciences, basic sciences, and mathematics. Since late 2008, I have been a member of the Hamilton school board and am presently completing my fourth year as its chairman. But that said, I am appearing before your committee as a concerned citizen, not as an official spokesman for the Hamilton School District.

Over the past four years, I have gone from being a cautious supporter of the Common Core State Standards to being a foe of this initiative. I would like briefly to explain to you what led to this transformation and to offer a suggestion on how House Bill 377 might be enhanced in order to produce high-quality curriculum standards in a way that bolsters public support for Montana's public schools.

In late 2011 Montana's Board of Public Education joined a nation-wide rush to adopt the Common Core State Standards and did so with no meaningful engagement with school districts across the state. At first blush, the standards themselves seemed reasonable enough. I was particularly fond of what appeared to be its increased emphasis on reading and writing. But in March of 2012, I came across an article in the *Missoulian*, in which a senior administrator at one of the state's largest school systems claimed that "Common Core very specifically outlines in 'nitty-gritty' detail not only what students are expected to learn, but exactly what teachers should be teaching." In the same article, the curriculum director at the same large school system asserted that students will be "reading, dissecting, and analyzing more 'informational texts'—

HB377 (Testimony by David F. Bedey)

with less an emphasis on fiction and literature from the classics.” What I had thought was to be an increased emphasis on reading was being interpreted by professional educators as a zero-sum game, with literature being the loser. Once I started looking more deeply into the Common Core State Standards, I discovered other potential flaws within the standards themselves. Many of my concerns could probably be adequately addressed, but unfortunately adoption of the Common Core State Standards is an all-or-nothing proposition, and there presently exists no mechanism for assessing the standards themselves or for changing them as necessary.

Rather than detailing my technical concerns about the standards themselves, which I would be happy to elaborate upon later, I will use the balance of my time to discuss a more fundamental issue regarding the initiative know as Common Core. And that is that in reality the Common Core is more than a set of standards: it is a comprehensive national curriculum of which the standards are the most innocuous component.

Proponents of the Common Core State Standards are quick to point out that a set of standards is not a curriculum; a point that I will concede. They go on to define the term “curriculum” as a system of planned classroom activities, which they claim will remain at the discretion of local schools to devise. I (and many others) dispute this narrow definition of curriculum, preferring rather to think of curriculum as an integrated combination of standards, learning models, and assessments. But for the sake of argument, let’s accept the proponent’s definition for now. How much leeway will local schools have with regard to classroom activities? Surely, the standards themselves must affect what is taught and how teaching and learning occurs in the classroom: Otherwise, why have standards at all? More importantly, in parallel with the hasty adoption of the Common Core standards have been the hasty adoption of a national testing regime, which includes the Smarter Balanced Assessment, and the frenzied efforts by textbook publishers and a plethora of education consultants to create textbooks and other pedagogic products that claim to be Common Core compliant. Standards plus the pressure exerted by national testing plus the products provided by the textbook industry will strongly influence how teaching and learning takes place in the classroom. Nationwide adoption of the Common Core package of standards, testing, and textbooks, is in effect the establishment of a national curriculum. Local schools will be free alright—free to do what they are told to do.

HB377 (Testimony by David F. Bedey)

But is nationalizing education really such a bad idea? Some don't think so. They believe that America is experiencing a public education crisis that requires instituting a national curriculum and abandoning federalism and local control in the context of public education. This line of reasoning presupposes that the so-called education crisis is the same in Chicago as it is in Great Falls as it is in Hamilton as it is in Hardin. But of course the challenges faced by schools across this country—and across Montana—differ both in kind and in severity. A one-size-fits-all, top-down curriculum would be most assuredly sub-optimal, if not ineffective, in most if not all cases. Effectively solving local problems demands solutions tailored to local conditions. Neither Common Core nor any other national curriculum is capable on serving such a purpose in our diverse nation.

The Common Core initiative represents a continuation of the centralization of the American education system, which arguably started with the creation of the Department of Education under the Carter administration. Federal intrusion into public education has increased ever since, most notably with the passage of No Child Left Behind, a project that was doomed to failure from its onset but that nonetheless continues to plague us. But doesn't it seem odd that after almost 40 years, we still have a crisis in education and are being told that to solve it requires further centralization. Perhaps this is the reason that Common Core is opposed by some teachers' unions as well as experts, think tanks, and media outlets on both sides of the partisan divide. Perhaps this why Common Core's support among teachers and the general public has eroded as more is revealed about its details. Perhaps it is time that we stop looking to Washington to improve our schools and instead take matters into our own hands.

The rushed adoption of the Common Core State Standards in Montana, and elsewhere, along with the accompanying development of a national testing regime and proliferation of questionable supporting educational materials, will likely have two consequences that neither the Common Core's supporters nor its opponents would wish. The first is the likelihood that Common Core will not be the panacea it purports to be ^{but rather} and will join No Child Left Behind in a succession of failed top-down approaches to improve public education. The second is the further erosion of public support for public education, which is being bred by the loss of a sense of local ownership of our public schools. When making crucial decisions is centralized in Washington,

HB377 (Testimony by David F. Bedey)

or in Helena for that matter, special interests of all stripes, from the unions to school board associations to single-issue advocates for social change or for privatization of K-12 education will set the agenda for public education. Local citizens tune out, sensing that the important decisions regarding their schools are out of their hands. This is the dynamic that was set in motion by the Carter administration and that has continued almost unabated through every presidential administration since then. It is time for those who support public education to adopt a different approach to education reform.

House Bill 377, along with other bills being considered here today, is a step in the right direction. However, I would recommend that the bill be amended to explicitly recognize the authority granted by our state's constitution to local boards of school trustees to supervise and control the public schools. In line with this, I further recommend that the bill be amended to give local school boards a vote in the process of approving accreditation standards. Although ~~the an~~ "accreditation standards review council" should play a key role in evaluating proposed standards, at least a simple majority of school boards across the state should concur with any proposed standards prior to the action going before the Board of Public Education. The Board of Public Education's decisions on proposed standards ought also to be subject to veto by a supermajority of elected school boards. Some will claim that involving school boards in the establishment of accreditation standards would be too cumbersome and would slow down the process of setting standards for our schools. Considering Montana's impetuous adoption of the Common Core State Standards, slowing down to allow for thoughtful deliberation would be a good thing. The net effect of making the appointed Board of Public Education and the elected boards of school trustees partners in the development of accreditation standards will be better standards that enjoy broad-based support by the citizens of our state. I believe that public support for public schools will also increase as citizens see that they have an effective say, through their elected school boards, on how their community's children are educated.

I strongly urge passage of House Bill 377, amended to increase the role of local school boards. We have here the opportunity to break free from a longstanding, but failed, effort to improve public education through centralized planning and governance. By "thinking out of the box," Montana has an opportunity to lead the nation in the realm of education reform. But most importantly we have the opportunity to improve the education of our children.